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THE STAGE ENTRANCES OF THE SMALL THEATRE AT POMPEII

IN the wall at the rear of the stage of the Small Theatre at Pompeii there were five doors. Only the openings remain; all traces of the door frames, as well as of the stucco which once covered the wall, have disappeared.

Three of the doors correspond with the stage entrances usual in Roman times. That marked *a* in Fig. 1, distinguished from the rest by its size (width of the opening 2.36 m., approximately 8 Roman feet), according to the description of the stage by Vitruvius (V, 7, 8), would be "the double door in the middle with ornamentation like that of a palace." The doors next to it on either side were somewhat narrower (width of the openings 1.75 m., approximately 6 Roman feet); they are the *hospitalia* of Vitruvius, the entrances designated as "right" and "left" in the description of Pollux.¹ The two remaining entrances, one near each end (*d*, *d'*, width of the openings, 3 feet 1 inch Roman measurement), are so small that they must have been closed by a single door.

At the west end of the stage is a broad doorway (*C'*), opening into the colonnade which led to the left parodos of the Large Theatre. It is shown in a plate by Mazois,² which is reproduced in fig. 98 of the Overbeck-Mau *Pompeji*; the opening has the same width (2.36 m.) as that of the middle door *a*. There is a similar doorway (*C*) at the opposite end, opening into a colonnade which was extended along the side of the building on Stabian Street. Large double doors were

¹ *Onomast.* IV, 124.

² *Les ruines de Pompéi*, vol. IV, pl. 27.

likewise placed in the ends of the long and narrow dressing room, *postscaenium*, behind the stage. One (*D*) opened into the colonnade on Stabian Street, the other (*D'*) into the por-

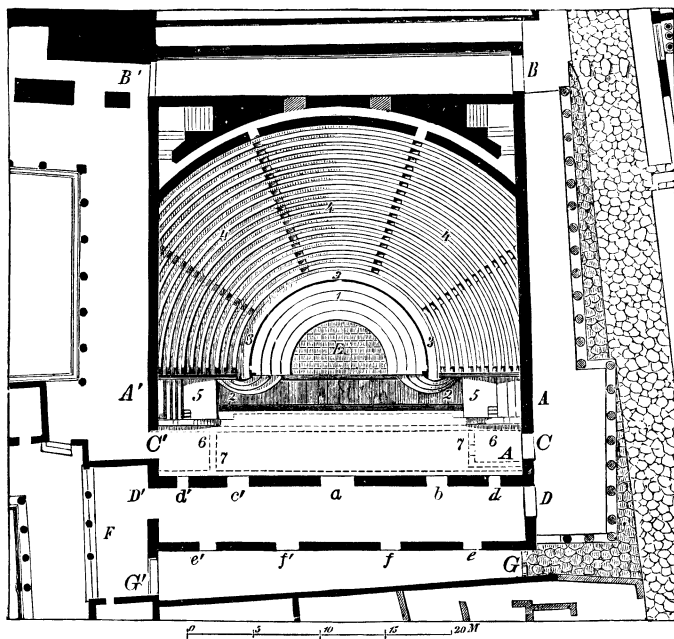


FIGURE 1.—PLAN OF THE SMALL THEATRE AT POMPEII.

(After Mazois, *Les ruines de Pompéi*, vol. IV, pl. 28, and Overbeck-Mau, *Pompeii*, fig. 97.)

<i>a, b, c.</i>	The ordinary stage entrances.	<i>C, C'.</i>	Large entrances at the ends of the stage.
<i>d, d'.</i>	Small entrances to the stage.	<i>D, D'.</i>	Large entrances at the ends of the postscaenium.
<i>e, e', f, f'.</i>	Rear entrances of the postscaenium.	<i>E.</i>	Orchestra.
<i>A, A'.</i>	Entrances to the parodoi, over which are the tribunalia, 5, 5.	<i>F.</i>	Portico at entrance of the Theatre Colonnade.
<i>B, B'.</i>	Entrances to passageway leading to left parodos of the Large Theatre.	<i>G, G'.</i>	Thoroughfare from Stabian St. to the Theatre Colonnade.
		<i>A.</i>	Small, low room under the stage.

tico (*F*) of the Theatre Colonnade, which in late times was transformed into barracks for gladiators;¹ the openings have the same width as those at *a*, *C*, and *C'*. The four doors open-

¹ See *Pompeii: Its Life and Art*, second edition, plan 3, and chap. XXIII.

ing at the rear of the postscaenium (*e, e', f, f'*) are narrow and all of the same width, $5\frac{1}{2}$ Roman feet.

The purpose of these many doors is not obvious. It must be determined, if at all, by considerations relating to the plan and use of the building. The designation of the building is not in doubt. On the inscription, preserved in duplicate, which gives us the names of the builders (*C.I.L. X. 844*), it is called a "roofed theatre," *theatrum tectum*. But if the inscription had not been preserved, the existence of a roof must have been inferred from the shape of the structure. The ends of the upper ranges of seats were cut off, not, as Nissen supposes,¹ because the architect was obliged to fit his building into a limited space, but rather in order to adapt it to the requirements of a rectangular plan, suitable for the construction of a roof; the depth might have been considerably increased without serious encroachment upon the area of the Large Theatre. That the roof must have been of wood is evident from the comparative thinness of the walls, which are too light to have sustained vaulting. The date of erection, which has been determined within narrow limits, may safely be placed within a couple of decades after the establishment of a Roman colony at Pompeii, in 80 B.C.

In most respects the plan does not differ from that of most Roman theatres; yet the building, with much probability, has generally been classed as an Odeum. The close association of such a structure with a large theatre has been frequently noted,² and it may well be that the Small Theatre in this and other cases was used for musical as well as dramatic exhibitions. It is, perhaps, not without significance, in relation to the use of the stage for theatrical performances, that a small, low room was built under the left end (A) with a separate wall at the rear, of the same height as the other walls supporting the stage (indicated on the Plan by broken lines), and an

¹ *Pompejanische Studien*, p. 240.

² See the list given by Müller, *Bühnenalterthümer*, p. 40, Anm. 3, and his characterization of an Odeum as a roofed theatre, p. 66.

opening into the oblong space under the middle. In ancient theatres the machine used for suspending gods and heroes in the air was at the left of the stage,¹ and was probably steadied by ropes running to pulleys underneath; in their scenic effects the ancients aimed at suggestion rather than illusion.

The two tribunals (*tribunalia*, 5, 5), resting on the vaults over the parodoi, together with the four rows of seats above

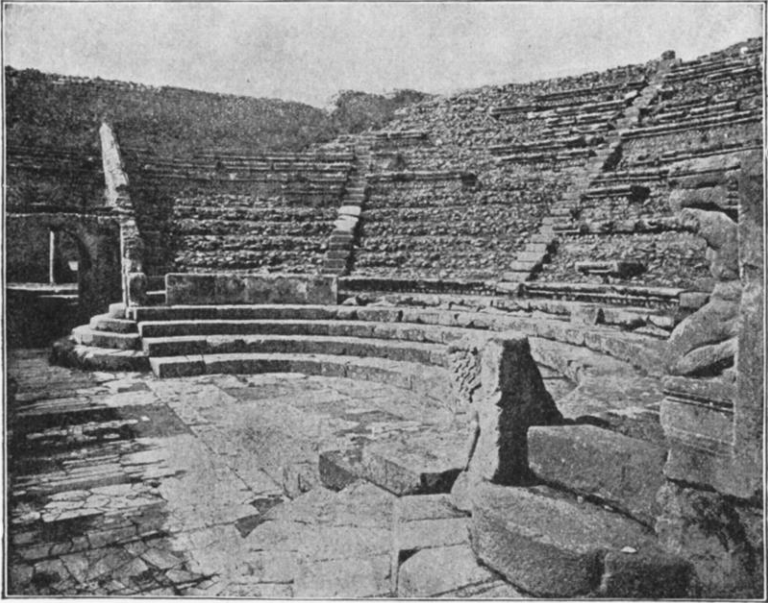


FIGURE 2. — VIEW OF THE SMALL THEATRE AT POMPEII. FROM THE INNER END OF THE LEFT PARODOS.

After *Pompeii: Its Life and Art*, second edition, fig. 67.

them, are entirely cut off from the seats of the adjoining cavea by a sloping stone parapet; the parapet on the west side, with the tribunal and the vault of the parodos underneath, is shown in Fig. 2. Entrance to the tribunals was made possible by narrow stone steps on the side of the stage (6, 6), which start from the floor of the stage near the front of the vaults over the parodoi, and ascend toward the outside wall; the last three

¹ Poll. IV, 128.

steps, at right angles with the rest, are cut in the side of the tribunal itself.

Our knowledge of the character and requirements of dramatic and musical exhibitions in the Roman period is so inadequate that explanations based upon them must remain purely conjectural. It cannot, however, be the result of accident that the doors at the ends of the stage (*C*, *C'*) and of the proscaenium (*D*, *D'*) were made of the same width, and that this measurement, again, corresponds with the width of the "palace entrance," *a*. The suggestion that these doors were designed for the admission of light to the stage and dressing-room¹ is untenable. How the building was lighted we do not know. Taking account of its condition at the time of excavation, we may suppose that the roof was broken in by the earthquake of 63 A.D., and that, while the débris had been cleared away, a new roof had not yet been built; evidence in regard to the shape of the roof is therefore entirely lacking. A flat roof, however, with a rectangular opening in the middle for light and air, like the compluvium of the large atriums, is hardly to be thought of. The span, nearly 100 Roman feet, is so great that supporting columns would have been needed; such columns in a theatre would not have been tolerated by a Roman audience on account of their interference with the view, and there is no trace of a foundation of a base among the seats of the cavea. It is more likely that the building was covered by a low hip-roof supported on simple wooden trusses; but even in this case it is not necessary to assume an opening for light in the middle, as in the case of the Odeion of Herodes Atticus, which was about two and a half times as large. Gau reports that traces of columns "supporting the roof" were still to be seen on the top of the outside walls, and suggests that the spaces between them were left open "for the admission of light and air." So large a roof, resting entirely on columns, would have been insecure. It is more reasonable to

¹ Gau (Mazois, *Les ruines de Pompéi*, vol. IV, p. 55) speaks of *C'* as "l'espace de fenêtre carrée qui donne sur le proscénium."

believe that the arrangement for admitting light was similar to that of the much older Basilica, as restored by Professor Mau (Fig. 3); that is, on the top of the outside wall, at the level of the higher portions now standing, sections of wall containing windows were built alternating with short rows of columns, the intercolumniations of which were left open. These were the columns of which traces were seen by Gau. When the roof fell in, at the time of the great earthquake, the columns and at least portions of the intervening sections of

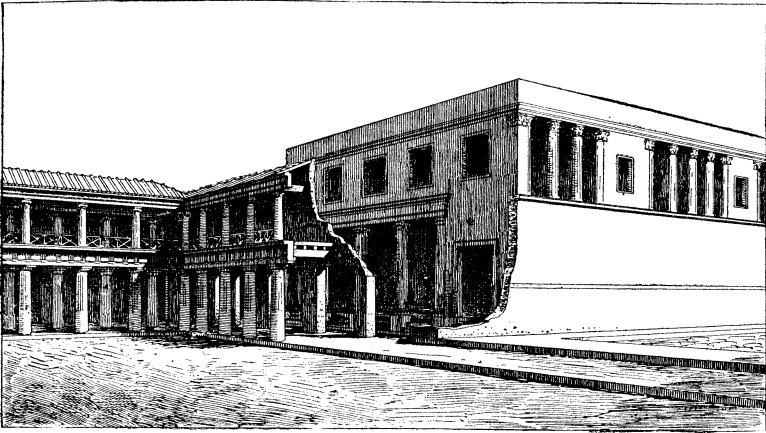


FIGURE 3. — EXTERIOR OF THE BASILICA AT POMPEII, AS RESTORED BY PROFESSOR MAU; AT THE LEFT, THE SOUTHWEST CORNER OF THE FORUM.

After *Pompeii: Its Life and Art*, fig. 25.

wall must have been shaken down with it. As the Pompeians cleared away the débris and resolved to leave the building unroofed, they naturally removed any remaining portions of the upper wall that had not been thrown down, so as to leave the outside of the building of a uniform height. The use of windows in an outside wall above the ranges of seats is well illustrated in the small theatre at Anemurion, in Cilicia.¹ We are warranted in believing that our building was lighted by means of openings in the upper wall; but in any case the light

¹ The similarity of this theatre to the Small Theatre at Pompeii was first recognized by Mazois (vol. IV, pp. 59-60, pl. 28).

furnished to the stage and dressing-room by the doors *C*, *C'*, *D*, *D'* would have been so inadequate that we must assume the admission of light from above.

The probable use of these large doors has been suggested by Professor Mau. We may reasonably assume for the Small Theatre at Pompeii, at least in the earlier decades, the introduction of processions at the opening of performances similar to those organized to inaugurate public exhibitions elsewhere. Such processions, at any rate before the Theatre Colonnade had been converted into gladiatorial barracks, probably started from the Forum or the court of the temple of Apollo, and after passing through the Forum Triangulare proceeded along the colonnade at the rear of the stage of the Large Theatre, entering the Small Theatre through the door at the west end of the stage (*C'*). Passing across the stage, they would leave the building by the opposite door (*C*). Stabian Street afforded no suitable place for disbanding; the colonnade at the side of the theatre therefore was so planned that the portion opposite the entrances *C* and *D* should have a greater depth than the rest, in order to make it possible for the processions to turn without being crowded and pass back through the dressing-room and the door *D'* to some place, apparently at the rear of the Large Theatre, where they could be disbanded. Two small entrances, one at each end of the stage — the *itinera versurarum* of Vitruvius — were required for the use of actors represented as coming from the city and from a distance; in the place of these, large entrances were made, as broad as the “palace door” at the middle of the stage, in order that the processions might be received and dismissed with becoming dignity; and since the processions could not conveniently make their way back through the narrow thoroughfare — doubtless crowded on gala days — between Stabian Street and the Theatre Colonnade (*G*, *G'*), similar doors, needed for no other purpose, were placed in the ends of the dressing-room.

To this explanation needs only to be added that the four large doors must ordinarily have been kept closed, whether a

performance was going on or not. If the doors were left open while a play or a musical exhibition was in progress, the preparations in the dressing-room and the performance on the stage must have been seriously disturbed by the noise outside and the crowding in of idlers; we must not assume that a Pompeian crowd on a holiday was less curious or mobile than an Italian crowd at Nola or Taranto on the occasion of a *fiesta*. If the Theatre was not in use, the doors at *C* and *C'* must have remained shut to prevent ready access to the board floor of the stage, which would have been ruined by the running across it; and it is reasonable to suppose that all the entrances of the dressing-room were kept closed on account of the storage of stage properties in it.

There remain to be considered the two narrow doors at *d* and *d'*. These were probably designed to give access to the two tribunals. There is no good reason for supposing that the Small Theatre was remodelled in antiquity¹ or that the tribunals, like those of the Large Theatre,² were an addition not contemplated in the original plan. During the period of almost a hundred and fifty years in which the Theatre was in use, repairs must have been made, and there has been some mending of the walls since excavation; but there is no evidence that points to a rebuilding. Unless further excavation about the foundations shall prove the contrary, we must believe that the vaults over the parodoi, together with the tribunals, and the doors *d*, *d'*, are a part of the structure as at first designed.

Assuming that the large doors *C'*, *C* were opened only for the entrance and exit of processions and for the occasional use of actors, we see that those entitled to the distinction of a seat on the tribunals³ might have reached the foot of the stairs leading to them in one of three ways:

First, by entering from the postscænium through the doors

¹ Canina, *Arch. Antiqua*, vol. IX, p. 324.

² *C.I.L.*, X, 833, 834.

³ Portable chairs were used on the tribunals, as well as on the broad ledges of the *ima cavea* (Fig. 1, 1). Piranesi (*Il Teatro d' Ercolano*, pl. 9) gives reproductions of two bronze chairs found on the tribunals of the theatre at Herculaneum.

b and *c* and crossing the stage. It is impossible to believe, however, that the consistent usage of antiquity could have been so far set aside as to permit the use of these doors by any who were not performers; and in Satyr plays, for example, if such were presented here, they must have been entirely concealed behind the rustic scenery.

Second, by entering the building at *A* and *A'*, passing through the *parodoi* and mounting the stage by means of wooden steps. This would perhaps have involved a less serious offence against ancient taste than the use of the ordinary stage entrances. The wall at the front of the stage, unlike that of the Large Theatre, is straight, and presented an unbroken surface, being veneered with marble. If such a means of access to the tribunals had been contemplated, recourse would not have been had to wooden steps, like those set in place when needed for the use of the actors, but inconspicuous permanent steps would have been built in the front of the stage, at the ends.

Third, by entering from the *postscaenium* through the doors *d* and *d'*, and passing over the stage. The use of the doors in this connection obviously harmonizes with the conditions; before accepting it as the correct explanation, however, we must inquire whether the doors were probably needed for any other purpose.

Gau thought that these doors had something to do with the arrangements of the theatre, but were hidden from the view of the audience "by some decoration"; Wieseler¹ regarded them as designed to connect the *postscaenium* with side-wings, *paraskenia*. At first glance one might be inclined to look upon the two transverse supporting walls under the stage (Fig. 1: 7, 7) as foundations of side-wings; but if partitions, whether temporary or permanent, had been erected on these walls, they would have interfered with the view of a number of those having seats on or above the tribunals, and sufficient room would not have been left between them and the entrances *b* and *c* for the mounting

¹ *Theatergebäude und Denkmäler des Bühnenwesens*, p. 14.

of the triangular side-screens, or *periaktoi*. Three doors at the rear of the stage sufficed for the requirements of the Large Theatre, in its Romanized form; there is no apparent reason why a larger number should have been needed for the stage business of the Small Theatre.

The sections of wall $b-d$ and $c-d'$ measure 9 Roman feet, 2 inches; the distance from the wall, when covered with stucco, to the steps at the side of the tribunals was about 12.5 feet.

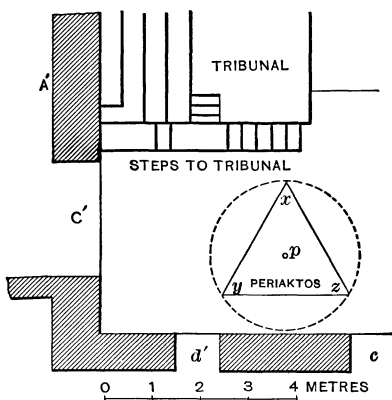


FIGURE 4.—DETAIL OF THE RIGHT END OF THE STAGE WITH A PERIAKTOS IN POSITION.

The adjustment of the *periaktoi* to these spaces may be illustrated by a simple diagram.

Let us assume that the sides of the *periaktos* represented in Fig. 4 measure 9 feet, and that it revolves on a centre 5.4 feet from the rear wall, and equally distant from c and d' ; the radius of the circle described will measure 5.2 feet. When the side $y-z$ is parallel with the rear wall, the apex x is

1.9 feet from the side of the stairs ascending to the tribunal, and the side $y-z$ is 2.6 feet from the wall; persons entering at d' would have no difficulty in passing around the corner x to the foot of the stairs, while the actor entering from the door C' at the end of the stage would go behind the *periaktos*, between the side $y-z$ and the wall, coming into the view of the audience as he advanced from the corner z .

We can only vainly conjecture what was the character of the paintings upon the sides of the *periaktoi*, the turning of which indicated a change of scene. It is obvious, however, that an upright strip of detached scene-painting less than 9 feet wide would not have been effective in an auditorium seating fifteen hundred people, in an age when opera glasses were as yet un-

known. If the periaktoi measured 9 feet on a side, however, the question arises how the procession at the beginning of a dramatic exhibition could have moved across the stage from one end to the other. As the framework of the periaktoi was doubtless light, they might have been set in place after the procession had passed through. It is also possible that they were simply turned around, for the time being, with an apex toward the rear wall; in that case the opposite side would have been 4.5 feet from the side of the tribunal stairs, and ample room would have been afforded for men to walk two abreast.

The use of the periaktoi is thus easily reconciled with the use of the large entrances *C*, *C'* for processions, and of the small doors *d*, *d'* by those having seats on the tribunals. The explanation offered is confirmed, so far as access to the tribunals is concerned, by the arrangements of the theatre at Herculaneum. Here a wooden bridge was built from the tribunal over the outer entrance to the stage to a door in the rear wall, from which stairs, at the end of the postscaenium, led down to the level of the ground outside; the arrangement is shown in both plan and section by Piranesi in his *Teatro d' Ercolano*, pls. 2 and 4.¹ At Pompeii probably the entrances *d* and *d'* were reserved for the use of those entitled to a place on the tribunals, and for their convenience also two outside doors, *e* and *e'*, were added; these would naturally have been placed opposite *d* and *d'*, but the four doors at the rear of the postscaenium were arranged with regard to a symmetrical distribution of the openings in the long façade. It may be that low wooden partitions, with doors that could be thrown open for the procession, were extended across the postscaenium in such a way as to make passageways at the ends connecting *e* with *d* and *e'* with *d'*; the middle space, with the three doors opening on the stage and two doors (*f*, *f'*) at the rear, would fully have answered the purpose of a dressing-room.

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¹ Cf. also Mazois, *Les ruines de Pompéi*, vol. IV, p. 72 and pl. 35.